

All at sea over Beijing brinksmanship

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The Australian
27 June 2011
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A man-made tempest is gathering in the South China Sea. Time and again in recent months, Chinese naval and paramilitary vessels have confronted ships from Vietnam and The Philippines in contested waters rich in energy deposits and fish.

Now the US has entered the ring, signalling it will back Manila if the crisis turns to conflict.

Chinese and US officials met at the weekend to try to break the spiral of mistrust between the two powers. But temperatures remain high, especially between China and Vietnam, with a Chinese state newspaper warning Hanoi that Beijing was ready for war.

All players are making shows of force. The US and The Philippines plan to hold military exercises in the days ahead. China and Vietnam have staged their own rival firing drills and manoeuvres.

The present parade of posturing will probably subside. But a disturbing pattern of brinksmanship is emerging in maritime Asia. If unchecked, it could throw the region into repeated crises, any of which could end in war at sea. This would have ruinous consequences for trade and stability in Australia's wider Indo-Pacific region.

The vital question is: why Beijing's assertiveness? Recent years have brought a spate of dangerous incidents, such as a tangle with a US surveillance ship and cases of close-range harassment of Japanese warships by Chinese helicopters. China has also refused to condemn its ally North Korea's sea attacks on South Korea.

Six months ago, the trouble seemed to ease. The hawks in China's internal strategic debates had spooked their compatriots as well as the region. Beijing's international rhetoric softened, and long-suspended military talks with Washington resumed.

But the respite turned out to be brief. If the situation is to be brought back under control, the world needs to understand the reasons for Beijing's risky deeds at sea. These are more complex than some simple notion of strategic aggression.

To be sure, Beijing is modernising its military, including with offensive capabilities such as anti-ship ballistic missiles. Its navy is ranging further and with increased firepower. An aircraft carrier may begin sea trials soon.

The logic of all of this is partly defensive. China has legitimate reason to protect its trade interests and energy imports. But Beijing also wants the option of taking Taiwan and keeping US forces at bay.

The big security picture in Asia involves changing deterrence and war-fighting strategies by China, the US and Japan. These involve expanded maritime patrols and intelligence-gathering, making more chances for close-range encounters. Meanwhile, nationalism and growing resource needs are reinforcing the value of territorial claims in the East China Sea, disputed by Japan and China, as well as the South China Sea.

Short-sighted internal rivalries compound the risks of conflict. In China, the generals are becoming a force in foreign policy. Some zealous officers may be provoking incidents at sea to advance their careers and prove their patriotism. And sometimes the hardliners are not military: China's fisheries and maritime law-enforcement agencies seem to be running their own expansive agendas.

For now, the risk of a major-power war escalating from maritime incidents centres on China's frictions with the US, Japan and other nations in East Asia.

But the tensions could reach across the wider Indo-Pacific region as the power and interests of China and India expand.

The region is ill-prepared to cope with this threat.

Asia's infrastructure of what the experts call confidence-building measures such as military dialogues, real-time communication channels and formalised "rules of the road" is flimsy and little-used.

Some politicians, scholars and officials wishfully claim that co-operative activities such as ship visits, combined disaster-relief exercises or partnership against piracy will translate into wider strategic trust. But there is little sign this is happening.

Meanwhile, China is showing little appetite in Asia for the diplomatic safety net that helped keep the Cold War cold: continuous hotlines between rival militaries and agreements on managing incidents at sea.

This stems from a difference of views about the point of military diplomacy. And this relates to fundamental clashes of interests, notably over military strategies and sovereignty, hence China's confrontational opposition to US surveillance in its exclusive economic zone. The prevailing view in Beijing is that trust should precede major advances in dialogue. In Washington and elsewhere, the standard view is that confidence-building measures are needed when trust is absent.

One glimmer of hope is that the Chinese view is not monolithic or static. New research is revealing a submerged debate in Beijing about the self-defeating dangers of belligerence at sea. The tragedy is that it is too late for moderates to gain a hearing once the shooting starts.

Rory Medcalf directs the international security program at the Lowy Institute. This article is based on a major Lowy-MacArthur Foundation paper to be released tomorrow